

Take Metra to your biking getaway

BY KATHERINE RODEGHIER
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Prices at the fuel pump putting a crimp into your getaway plans? Leave your gas guzzler in the garage and take a close-to-home minivacation by train and bike.

The McHenry County Prairie Trail passes within blocks of the downtown Metra station in Crystal Lake and travels through woods and farm fields, especially appealing on cool autumn days when the leaves change color. Detour in small towns along the way for food and lodging in hotels or bed-and-breakfasts.

Twenty bikes per train are allowed on this Union Pacific/Northwest Line, except weekdays during rush hours. Trains depart downtown Ogilvie Transportation Center and arrive about 90 minutes later in Crystal Lake for a fare of \$6.50 if you buy your ticket at the station. You also can board at Northwest Side and suburban stations.

Bob and Peggi Braden, of Waukegan, went one better, skipping the train altogether, and used a necklace of Illinois bicycle paths that took them south to Oak Park, west to Elgin and then north. By the time they hit McHenry County, the fit 50-somethings were on Day 4 of a 150-mile journey.

The Prairie Trail stretches 26 miles, crossing the Fox River in Algonquin and heading north to the Wisconsin border, often following a straight-as-an-arrow abandoned rail corridor of the Chicago and Northwestern Line. From Crystal Lake north it enters



KATHERINE RODEGHIER/PHOTO FOR TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Having skipped the train, Peggi and Bob Braden, of Waukegan, are on a 150-mile bike journey.

Sterne's Woods, the most winding and scenic section of the trail but also the hilliest and most challenging. At Ringwood, the surface switches from paved to gravel and enters Glacial Park, a 3,200-acre nature preserve of prairie and marsh. In Richmond, it intersects the North Branch and Hebron trails, traveling another seven miles west.

Before setting out from down-

town Crystal Lake, grab a snack next to the depot at Pop's Corn Crib, or stop by the farmers market that runs Saturday mornings through Oct. 15.

In McHenry, pedal over to the Fox River for a meal at the Windhill Pancake Parlor or the Snugery, where you can watch river traffic from the patio.

If you're in Algonquin, dine riverfront at Port Edward, a nau-

tical-theme destination restaurant.

Reward yourself in Richmond with hand-dipped chocolates at Anderson's Candy Shop, an old-fashioned candy store in business since 1926, or head over to one of just 11 remaining Dog N Suds Drive Ins in the U.S., this one restored to its '60s appearance and open through October.

If you go

Information

Prairie Trail, McHenry County Conservation District: 815-338-6223, mccdistrict.org/web/re-bicycling.htm

Metra: 312-322-6900, metra.rail.com

McHenry County Convention and Visitors Bureau: 815-363-6177, visitmchenrycounty.com

Finding the trail

From the downtown Crystal Lake station, bike east to Main Street. To go north toward Richmond, bike north on Main to Prairie Street and east to Glen Avenue to join the trail north on residential streets. If going south toward Algonquin, bike south on Main to Crystal Lake Avenue and join the trail on the west side of Main.

Lodging

Inn at Lake Elizabeth, Richmond: 815-678-4335, theinnatlakeelizabeth.com

Victorian Rose Garden Bed & Breakfast, Algonquin: 847-854-9667, sleepandeat.com

Hampton Inn, McHenry: 815-578-1900, mchenry.hamptoninn.com

Holiday Inn, Crystal Lake: 815-477-7000, hicrystallake.com, complimentary shuttle within five miles

Comfort Inn, Crystal Lake, 815-444-0040, comfortinn.com, just south of Pingree Metra Station

Country Inn & Suites, Crystal Lake: 815-477-3500, countryinns.com, just south of Pingree